

Jorge Colapinto

HOSTAGE CHILDREN¹

In theory, foster care is a temporary custody arrangement for children who are identified as victims of abuse or neglect. According to the latest official guidelines, a decision should be reached within twelve months. In reality, many children linger in foster care for years, prevented from returning to their biological families and from moving ahead to a permanent adoptive family.

The impasse is set up early on, as soon as a child enters foster care. The initial "service plan" consists of two separate tracks -one for children and another for the parents (or rather, as is often the case, a single parent). In a typical scenario, a boy may be "stabilized" in a foster home, while his mother is directed to drug rehabilitation, parent skill learning, and/or the housing authority. The plan calls for the child to remain in his track until the parent completes her own, at which point they will rejoin; alternatively, should the mother "derail" -for instance by refusing to undergo drug rehabilitation-, her parental rights may be terminated and the child "freed for adoption".

This two-track layout effectively cancels the parent-child relationship. Constrained to circulate in her own track, the parent is not allowed -or required- to participate in any significant decisions affecting the life of her son, or even to keep in touch with him, beyond a couple of hours every other week. Her role as a parent is totally obliterated, well beyond what would be required to protect the wellbeing of the child. She progressively loses touch with her son's developing needs, confidence in her ability to parent, and even interest in resuming full parenting, all of which undermines the chances of a successful reunification. On the other hand, she enjoys the deceptively comfortable position of retaining the title of parent, without having to endure the responsibilities and hardships of the actual role; this shields her from confronting and exposing her limitations as a parent, and therefore reduces the chances of surrender or a termination of her parental rights.

The child is now at an impasse, revisited every six months when the case comes up for review. More often than not, the reviewers -workers, supervisors, judges- conclude that there is not enough evidence to either return the child to the mother or terminate her rights. Therefore, placement is extended for yet another six months. Through successive extensions, the child is held indefinitely hostage to the conflict between the state and the parent, neither of whom will either let go of the child or claim him decisively.

Both the hostage situation and the two-track strategy that leads to it are consistent with the devaluation of human relatedness that permeates the policies of our social services. Within the culture of foster care, the parent-child relationship is treated at best as serendipity -as something that can be turned off for a long time without suffering serious damage. At worst, the relationship is seen as a complication to be avoided ("When parents see their children they make false promises and then the children are disappointed"; "The mother needs time away from the children to focus on her own

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needs"), or as a commodity to be exploited in the service of other, more valued goals ("If the mother is prevented from seeing her children, she will be more motivated to get her act together").

Insensitive to the value of relationships, the culture of control and coercion further weakens the already fragile attachment between these parents and their children. Children who are protected from "false promises" are deprived of an opportunity to challenge the parent who let them down; the parent, of an opportunity to grow up to the challenge. Parents whose contact with their children is made contingent on their compliance with a rehabilitation plan may comply with the plan, but they may also lose interest in the children and become engrossed in a distracting fight with the contingency planners. (As Gregory Bateson put it: If you are rewarded with ice-cream provided you eat your vegetables, will you end up loving vegetables -or, rather, hating ice-cream? Or will you fight with whoever set the reinforcement schedule?). The perverse irony is that the same controlling and coercive practices that undermine the parent-child bond also prevent the child from developing alternative bonds. Locked in their power struggle, the state and the parent abandon the child in what has become known to insiders as the limbo of foster care -a place of tentative, provisional, and conflictual attachments.

To alleviate the plight of its hostage children, the foster care system would need to embrace four radically different policies:

The first policy is accountability to the child. The adults involved -biological and foster parents, workers, family and child advocates, judges- should concentrate their efforts on reducing the time spent by the child in foster care, as well as the stress experienced by the child while he or she is in foster care. This contrasts with current policies that allow adults to tamper with the child's life time while they engage in the pursuit of their own conflictual agendas, such as the struggle over drug use versus abstinence.

The second policy is the promotion of connectedness. Accountability to the child requires an ongoing and fluid dialogue among the relevant parties involved: the children themselves, the biological and foster parents, the extended family, the schools, etc. This contrasts with the fragmentation of the child's world that is currently promoted by keeping most of these people apart from each other, often for reasons that have little to do with the interests of the child: "Foster and biological parents should not meet because they can hurt each other's feelings"; "Women who are undergoing drug rehabilitation should not have contact with their children and families, so that they can focus on their recovery", or "Belligerent parents (i.e., parents who get angry at the system) will have their visitation rights curtailed". (The latter example -the use of "relational deprivation" as punishment for something else- exposes the current foster care system at its iatrogenic worst)

(An important caveat for family therapists entering the world of foster care: beware of professional biases. In the world of foster care, encouraging connections is more important than correcting them; families need to be allowed to happen before they can be dissected and rearranged. A mother scolding her son over homework may be not as good a relationship as a mother supporting him, but is better than the mother not knowing what is going on with her son's schooling. A biological and a foster parent who argue over what is best for the child are more helpful to the child than their counterparts who never talk to each other)

The third policy is the fostering of parental responsibility. "Connectedness" does not mean just "frequent visitation": parents should be allowed (and required) to relate to their children as parents. Placing a child in foster care should not be equated with a total cessation of parenting. While some parenting functions (such as providing shelter and nutrition) obviously require physical cohabitation, there are many others (such as meeting the child's teachers, attending medical appointments, discussing life issues with the child) that can be exercised even when parent and child are not living under the same roof.

The exercise of parental responsibility during the time that the child is in foster care serves multiple purposes: it protects the child's experience of continuity; it gives the parent the opportunity to maintain and increase her competence; and it provides a yardstick against which to measure the parent's competence and motivation. All of this increases the chances that the decision to either reunite a child with the parents or terminate the parents' rights will be reached sooner, rather than later.

The fourth policy calls for the acknowledgment and validation of difference. Foster care is a complex environment where conflicts of interest are to be expected. Biological parents, foster parents, and multiple workers are bound to pursue different and most probably diverging agendas. It is understandable that the relationships among them often become difficult, that they tend to distrust and even dislike each other. Still, for the sake of the child, they need to relate, no less than divorced parents do.

In the current foster care system, difference and conflict are ignored, avoided, or detoured for the sake of "stability" -which usually means a relatively peaceful, "no-waves" environment for the adults. Workers are expected and trained to defuse -rather than harness in behalf of the child- the anger of a parent who feels victimized, dispossessed or just impatient.

By contrast, in a foster care system that holds itself accountable to the children, the parent who agitates and complains that 12 months is too long a time to be separated from her newborn baby would be good news, while the "cooperative" parent who meekly accepts the hostage situation of her child would be a reason for serious concern.